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Interview TICKET

Mariposa Documents Positives and Negatives: "Stories of Some of Our Lives"



The people who made it possible! some of the subjects of "Stories of Some of Our Lives"

by Vito Russo

The lifeless body of Shirley MacLaine sways gently at the end of a long heavy rope. A frozen cinematic memory. Rod Steiger walks quietly into the green forest carrying a loaded shotgun. Click. Sandy Dennis lies broken beneath the twisted branches of a fallen tree. A photo for the family album. Don Murray slits his throat with a razor in the oak-paneled washroom of his Senate office chamber. Another image pressed between the pages. Our lives on film. The album is full of memories. Beryl Reid mooring in anguish in a deserted television studio. Rex Harrison kneels in a graveyard weeping. Al Pacino waves a rifle in the air outside a Brooklyn bank. Our lives on film.

Part of the reason why the alleged gay experience has not been captured on the screen is because it has not been sufficiently articulated in real life. Commercial films cannot reflect what cannot be seen. With a few exceptions, the Hollywood sideshow of the past eight decades has been a strictly heterosexual view of the eternal question, "Who are these people and what are they doing here?" Given our number, our diversity and our chronic invisibility, it is not at all surprising that our search for a gay sensibility has long been confined to covert academic theory. Simply put, you can play hide and seek with everyone from Howard Hawks to Pier Pasolini but you cannot listen to the cinema converse in your own language, especially about your own life.

In the years since the initial resurgence of feminism we have seen scores of short subjects and features that create and define a new language in which women talk about the experience of being women. I refer not to *Alice Doesn't Live Here Any More*, which was fun, but to films like *Growing Up Female*, in which real people were able to articulate moments of their lives. These kinds of films gave women the freedom to discuss things previously closed to them. Some of the most modest of these films became lightning rods, defining issues for all women.

Thus far there has been a thin trickle of such films from the gay movement. Not enough people who want to or even know how to make a film are far enough out of the closet to do it. Again I refer not to *A Very Natural Thing*, which was fun, but to films

like *Coming Out* and the recent *Gay U.S.A.*, documentaries centered on people. A hidden dream inside every gay documentarian must surely be to find a way to show "them" who we all really are, a magic trick on the order of the old "What if we were all suddenly bright blue for a day" routine. Which is why *Stories of some of our lives* is such a cunning sub-title for the new Mariposa Film Group documentary *Word Is Out*. The expertly interwoven conversations of 26 gay men and women originally grew from an idea by filmmaker Peter Adair to do a film called *Who Are We?* It has evolved, after five years and over 200 videotaped interviews, into the collective effort of three women and three men whose separate visions reshaped the scope of the film into a major documentary with implications greater than any of them had first imagined. By not trying to answer Peter Adair's original question, all six filmmakers have made *Word Is Out* an electric piece of living history.

The gallery of 26 people finally chosen by the filmmakers to tell their stories on screen does so with a power and honesty that alternately tears your heart out and keeps you in stitches. There is an implicit sense of community in the film and a strange sense of longing produced when gay people break their traditional silence and talk about their lives in a public way. In *Word Is Out* the subjects range in age from 18 to 77, and their diversity is stunning. A lesbian named Whitey tells how her mother's psychiatrist treated her lesbianism by putting her on a diet of two green salads a day and we sit and whisper "Jesus, imagine all the crazy things they had gay people doing all these years."

Pat Bond, a born comic, was a WAC in the 1940's. Waving a cigarette, she says, "My recruiting Sargeant was just darling to me. She wore tiny little earrings and had her hair very short—but done very daintily so you couldn't tell she was a dyke. But I knew." Smile. And we remember that we know, too, most of the time.

A handsome man named David with braces on his teeth sits by a pond in Massachusetts, playing with some daisies growing nearby. He talks about how wonderful it was the first time he realized he could love another man and how he broke the news to his father. "I asked him if he was ready for a heavy conversation and he

said 'let me grab a cigarette.' I told him to grab the whole pack." A Boston actor named Roger talks about growing up gay in the '50s. "They fought the second world war and they said 'O.K., this is what we defended—now fit into it.' And then they got old." A woman named Linda Marco sits on her porch swing in North Carolina and remembers high school. "I was the American dream daughter... cheerleader, prom queen, straight-A student, president of the honor society, newspaper editor... I was miserable. I hated it."

The film is a two-hour journey filled with delightful recognition and too many thoughts, dreams and issues to assimilate in just one viewing. For the six filmmakers, also, it has been a journey. What began as an idea for a teaching film by Peter Adair became a concept involving five other people who weren't even sure they wanted to work together. But at one point, they all came to realize that they were creating a film that would encompass each of their separate visions. Rob Epstein, Veronica Selver, Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown and Lucy Massie Phoenix all joined Peter Adair at different points in the project. Each person both filmed and interviewed their sub-

jects at the same time. they worked in different parts of the country filming and raising money and came together to edit the footage collectively. It reflects who they are as much as it does the subjects, and *Word Is Out* has become a film about 32 people.

Three of the filmmakers, Peter, Veronica and Lucy, talked recently in New York about the film, and their conversation makes the individual attitudes which created the film apparent.

Peter: It's very important for us to talk about the fact that we worked as a group.

Why is that?

Peter: Because there's a star system in America that dies hard.

Lucy: It's too confusing for people to think of a group working together in new ways. They'd rather have the name of one director to remember. What we've presented is revolutionary.

Is there a unified vision in Word Is Out?

Peter: There were disagreements, but there weren't any fights about form and content.

Lucy: In some ways we all spoke about the film as though we were talking about the same thing even when we weren't sure what direction we were going in.



Co-producer/director Nancy Adair fields questions following a special screening of *Word Is Out* for the deaf and blind held at S.F.'s Gateway Cinema in January. Translator is Tom Falcon.

Peter: There were certain premises that were very fundamental. The film would deal with both women and men, it would be portraits of people intercut with each other and the film would never take an overt, political, rhetorical stand.

Lucy: And that got refined as we began to realize that the film had an integrity quite apart from our own.

Peter: The film was something that needed to be made. In some ways it had its own direction, and we were willing to listen to it. This is sounding a lot more hippie than I want it to sound.

When did it become apparent to you that the film was larger in scope than you expected?

Peter: I'd had the idea for it in much the same form as it is now. It would be interviews with people about their lives. In order to raise money I needed to do a demo on video tape, and I felt I couldn't do women so I leaned on my sister Nancy, who is a lesbian and asked, 'Would you do the women?' This meant no commitment from me to work with her, because she and I have a history of not getting along. And her first tapes were so much what I had in mind that there was no way out of working together.

Veronica: The fundamental change in the film was between the eight people originally shot on video tape and the decision to expand, which involved a lot. It involved a much more conscious decision of who the people in the film were going to be.

Was there a conscious decision made not to use well-known movement people?

Peter, Lucy and Veronica: Yes!

Peter: There was a conscious decision very early on not to use "stars." And there was a lot of pressure to do so. Using Dave Kopay might have changed the entire film. The only person I wanted and couldn't get was Dag Hammarskjöld's lover.

Were there always questions everyone got asked?

Lucy: No. Always the priority was people being able to tell their own story. In later interviews there was more of a focus, because

people were chosen for specific reasons.

Peter: There was almost never a question of who we would use. People just came to life on film, and it was obvious that they were working.

Are there things not discussed in the film that you are conscious of now that it's finished?

Veronica: One of the things the film doesn't deal with is the differences between men and women.

Lucy: Well, one of the things we probably became conscious of near the beginning was that we were, in some ways, creating a false image. We were talking about gay men and women. Not women and men and not lesbians and gay men. We were talking about gay men and women. And there are a lot of things that aren't explored in the film which we became very frustrated with not exploring. We also wanted to and didn't go into the whole question of living in a gay community or perhaps a gay ghetto.

Peter: I think if we're going to build a movement—and we've heard all the rhetoric about how men and women are going to have to learn to work together—we're going to have to learn about what the differences are between men and women. And also the difference between lesbian and gay male sexuality. I find that I have a lot of guilt about my kind of sexuality, about the amount of sex that I want and have . . .

Veronica: What kind of guilt?

Peter: That it's ripping people off or that I should be doing better things with my time. It certainly isn't moral guilt. But this is an area where lesbians have trouble with gay men—promiscuity—and I feel disapproved of by women because of that. One of the great things about having worked with this group is that I never felt *that* from any of you.

Veronica: That was also the issue that was most unresolved between us. It's nice to hear you say that you felt free, Peter. For my part, I was always just curious, you know? Like, 'What do they do at the baths?' and all that. But in any case I feel that is where

the film couldn't reach. It's a monumental unknown for each *one* of us, this issue of individual sexuality and comparing our differences. The scope is tremendous. Although we, as people, did a lot of ground-work in that area personally. Our friendships, which developed over the making of the film, are a result of all that work.

Lucy: You see, all of the things that the film is *not* are things we explored anyway in the process of making the film. We explored them *all the time*, and that was the hardest part of it all.

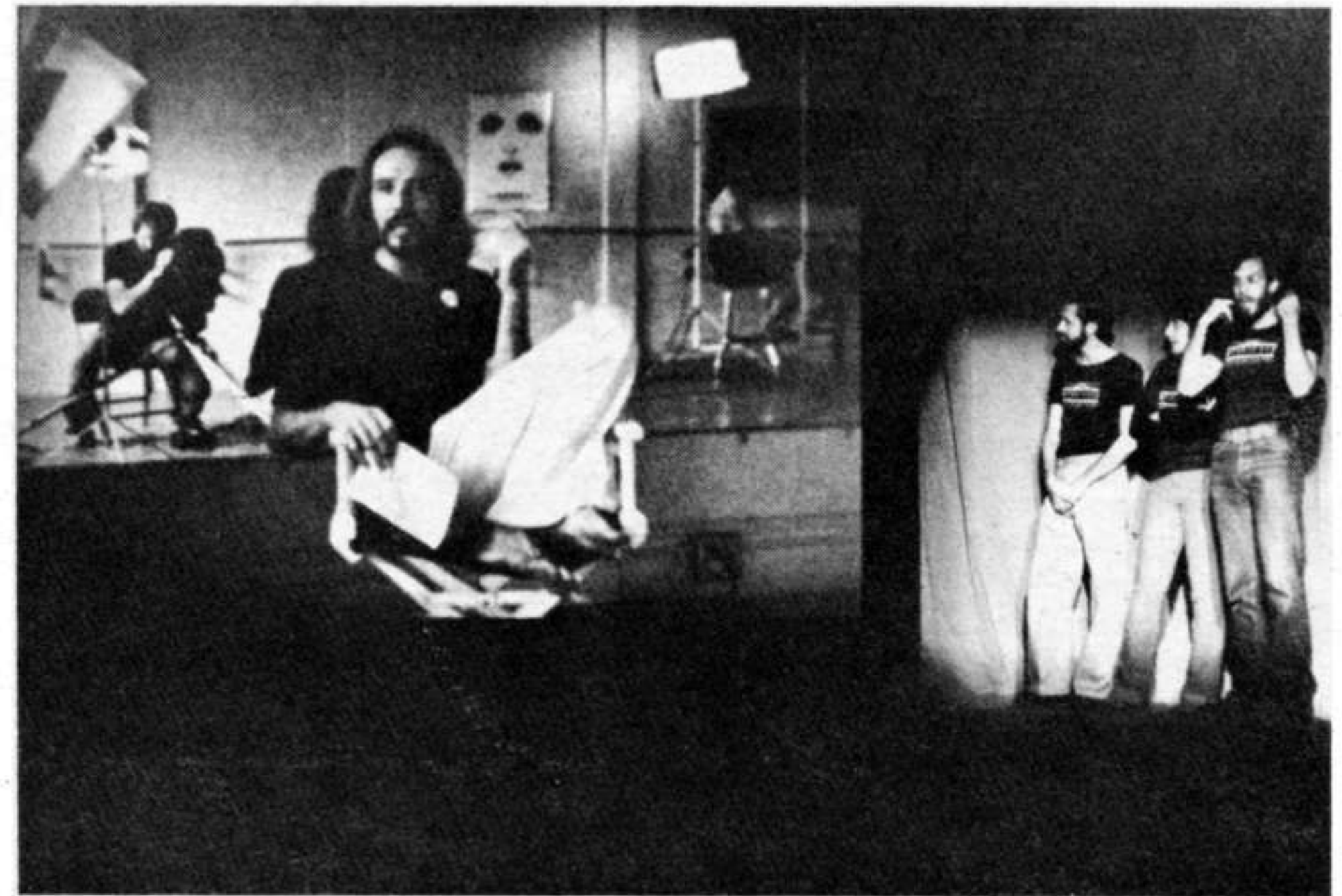
Veronica: And to sort of round it off, it's interesting to find Peter talking about differences of men and women and how we need to work together to spell out those differences *now* when the film is finished. The film doesn't *do that* for us. We do it.

Are you still afraid that people will want to see the film as "who we are"?

Peter: Well, I don't want to be given that

power. And I don't like the idea of giving the film that job. I want the film to be taken as it is and not as a representation of 20 million people. We could have made a *terrible* film using 26 gay people and it *still* would have been taken to represent who gay people are. So we had to approach that problem responsibly. And the way to do that was to realize that people would say, "This is who gay people are." And that's a fundamental problem because the initial temptation is to use people who are role models, who are acceptable—which means you are adopting the values of the enemy. Now on the other hand, you don't want to use *all* drag queens. And I'm not personally from the John Rechy school of "Well, fuck 'em. We'll screw in the streets and that's the revolution." That's not my particular way. So what do you do?

Lucy: Part of the power of the film is that
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In a Hitchcockian cameo appearance as cameraman, co-producer/director Peter Adair unbares the life of one of the central figures in the film Word Is Out.

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it's not something only gay people can identify with. Everybody who sees the film can understand themselves through it in a lot of different ways. We are certainly not drawing a line and saying this is *us* and this is *you*.

Veronica: That is one of the most difficult conflicts we had in making the film. What to choose from whom and why. Some things exist in the film that are interesting or funny only to gay people. Some straight friends of mine have said that the whole series of first sexual experiences is less interesting to them and yet . . .

Peter: And yet gay people love that because for us it means finding out how all those people coped with things we've all been through. While the film doesn't pander to any audience by having gay spokespeople who are "respectable," you have to remember to talk to your audience in terms in which they can hear you. If you're trying to convert the Women's Temperance League to Socialism you don't do it with a martini in your hand. A lot of people call that being co-opted, but it depends on what you want. Now there were different interests in all of the people in our group—especially, I think, Veronica's and mine. She just says what she thinks is truthful. I'm aware of what people are hearing. One of the ways I think the film addresses its audience is in the matter of economic politics. It was in this area that I expected to get trashed. And as a matter of fact, we have been, in a socialist film newspaper called *Jump Cut*. They had seen a rough cut a long time ago and said that certain concessions were made to get the film on PBS television, which is crap. This film is what we made it. We're aware of what we want to talk to our audience about.

Veronica: I disagree. I have not heard one of us talk with sufficient coherence or knowledge in an articulate way on the subject of the relationship of economics and gay oppression. I will be the first to say that I am not capable of doing it. It takes more than sympathy to articulate that view in any cogent way. I don't even think there's anyone on the film who *knows* about it, with the exception of Sally Gearhart, who has done some thinking in that area.

Lucy: The thing is that it's never explored in the film. Nadine talks

about the sexism and the kind of place where she lives in New Mexico, and you get the feeling that when the film opens she may be in a dangerous position. But that's all implicit. This is something I'm aware of not having tried to do. I don't want people to think we didn't think it was important.

Peter: Or worse, that we responded to pressure from some television network. That's why I got so angry at that *Jump Cut* piece. He assumed we *did* think of it and buckled under for commercial purposes.

Where'd he get that idea?

Peter: Made it up.

Veronica: Well, I think it's interesting *now* to look for the underlying observations and allusions to class struggle in the words of the people speaking, but to have imposed that politic on the film originally would have betrayed it.

There has been no betrayal of the material in *Word Is Out*. The subjects are so real that it's like watching a future volume of Jonathan Katz's *Gay American History* come to life while still being written. The silence of gay people on the screen has been broken, and the voices of the 26 gay men and women who have broken it are so personal and so moving that they do indeed show us who we are. They point up our common experience of growing up gay in a straight world and inform us of the tremendous strength in ordinary gay people that has enabled us to survive even though we thought we were the only ones in the world. Elsa Gidlow, a 77-year-old woman poet, says near the beginning of the film, "If there was ever any problem connected with my being a lesbian, it was the loneliness, the fact that I didn't know anybody like me. Where were the others if there were any?" Well here they are at last—some of them, anyway. Some of our lives on film. See *Word Is Out*. It isn't often that a group of people can watch their own evolution in progress. ●

[*Word Is Out*, an Adair Films Release, will open in New York City March 26th at the UA East-side Cinema, 3rd Avenue at 55th. The film will also open in Los Angeles in cooperation with the Filmex Film Festival scheduled in April at UA's Westwood Theater. Plans for national distribution are in negotiation.]



Photo/Janet Cole